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Keats' concept of death

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ABSTRACT

Keats' concept of death is paradoxical in that it must necessarily encompass a philosophy of life as well. The poet both intensely desired life and intensely desired death. Thus it is not surprising to discover that Keats' attitude toward death follows two contradictory lines of thought, both of which are evidenced in his poetry and letters. The first and more unique attitude is his association of death with things desirable. The four major concepts with which Keats associates death are rebirth and its related themes of sleep and dreams and hope of immortality, love, the transiency of joy and pleasure, and finally, quietness and peace. Upon the examination of Keats' poetry and letters, a development from a reluctant assertion of the positive aspect of death to a mature acceptance of death as something highly desirable, can be seen. The opposing attitude is Keats' association of death with things undesirable, or the treatment of death itself as undesirable. There is no particular development in this undercurrent in Keats' thinking, but the continual presence of this attitude throughout his poetry and letters is important in giving evidence of Keats' rejection of death and his desire for life. Thus, even though Keats finally came to accept death as the

ultimate source of the peace which he desired so much, he, nevertheless, simultaneously resisted and rejected death. The paradox and the conflict, seen in Keats' attitude toward both life and death, remain as evidence of the intensity which he felt in every experience.

INTRODUCTION

Death played a large and disproportionate role in the life of John Keats. When the poet was but eight years old, his father died, to be followed less than a year later by an infant brother, Edward, and his grandfather. In January 1809, Keats lost a favorite uncle; and a year later, he lost his mother, perhaps one of the most difficult losses to sustain. In December 1814, his grandmother Jennings died; and four years later, Keats watched by the bedside of his fatally ill brother, Tom. Less than three years after the death of his brother, Keats himself was to die from the same disease. The effect of these losses, added to his own certain knowledge that he was to die, made Keats more poignantly and sensitively aware of the meaning of death, and conversely, of life. His poetry and letters, therefore, manifest a preoccupation with death that is less a result of the Romantic qualities which he possessed than a consequence of his own personal misery and the effect of the thought of death on a sensitive nature.

This subject of Keats' preoccupation with death is a difficult and elusive one. It defies organization because of its very abstract, intangible nature. The subject does not fall into a neatly arranged pattern,

nor does it show a clear-cut development in one direction. In fact, there are two distinctly contradictory lines of thought in Keats' concept of death, both of which occur in his poetry and letters throughout his life. The first, and most important, is the association of death with things desirable, an idea unique in itself, and the real raison d'être for this thesis. The second, less unique, but not less important, is the association of death with things undesirable, or the treatment of death itself as undesirable.

There is a development in the first part from Keats' at first tentatively positive attitude toward death to a mature acceptance of death as desirable, an acceptance made possible through a mature knowledge of the suffering and misery of life. However, as Keats moved from a naive, immature idea of death to a positive acceptance of it, he simultaneously resisted and rejected death. Herein lies the difficulty in organizing Keats' thoughts into some kind of rational order. His thoughts on death were both complex and contradictory, caused naturally by his intense desire for life and his equally intense desire for the peace which would accompany death. Thus, there is here a paradox. But the thought of death was so ever present with Keats that some attempt must be made to clarify the conflict that waged within his mind and heart.

Since Keats positively associated death with certain desirable things, the organization of the first part of the thesis, in which the development toward an acceptance of death is established and illustrated, shall be basically topical, though chronological within each topic. This will better clarify both the understanding of the abstract concepts with which Keats associated death, and the development toward a final acceptance of death. For Keats, death was more than merely an escape from the misery of life. Death is associated with rebirth and with sleep and dreams as opposed to reality. Death is also the gate to immortality which Keats hoped to achieve through his poetry. One of the most important associations for Keats was the relationship of death with love. Death is also related to the transiency of joy and beauty and the juxtaposition of sorrow and beauty, important concepts to Keats in his later years. Death is finally related to quiet and peace and ease, as opposed to the hardship of life.

The organization of the second part will be chronological rather than topical since the purpose of this part is to indicate the continued presence of the undercurrent in Keats' thinking about death as undesirable. The association of death with things undesirable, such as fear and the knowledge that death means the end of

all possibility of further achievement, constantly creeps into Keats' poems and letters, thus seeming at times to negate his positive acceptance of death. However, this is only to be expected, since the poet possessed such an intense desire for life, an altogether natural desire. The difference with Keats is that he did finally come to accept death in an association that was desirable rather than undesirable.

Thus both attitudes are important for a total understanding of Keats' concept of death, and although we recognize the uniqueness and importance of Keats' acceptance of death as a positive, desirable thing, we cannot ignore his simultaneous rejection of it. Because of the presence of these two opposing lines of thought, both of which often occur in the same poems, the organization of this thesis has been no easy task. This, however, is a difficulty inherent in any attempt to arrange or classify the many divergent elements in the active mind of a sensitive poet such as Keats.

PART I

KEATS' ASSOCIATION OF DEATH WITH THINGS DESIRABLE

Keats' ideas about death are linked with other abstract concepts which represent the poet's association of death with things desirable. The four major concepts with which Keats positively associates death are rebirth and its related themes of sleep and dreams and immortality, love, the transiency of pleasure and its related theme of the juxtaposition of sorrow and joy, and finally, peace or calm. This last idea probably haunted Keats most of all, and it is this association of death with ease or peace that led him finally to a positive acceptance of death. These four major concepts shall be studied independently, the chronology of the individual poems within each group thus showing the development and progression of Keats' attitude toward a positive acceptance of death.

Keats' poem, "On Death," is the first to relate his ideas of death to the concept of rebirth and dreams. The poem, written on the occasion of the death of his grandmother Jennings in December 1814, is Keats' earliest poem on the subject of death. "On Death" is a naive, undeveloped assertion, written in the traditional didactic method and style of the eighteenth century. [1] Nevertheless, it is a positive assertion and thus must form the beginning of Keats' gradually developing attitude

toward the association of death with desirable concepts.

In this poem, Keats suggests the paradox that life is a dream, a phantom, a vision, while death is the state of wakefulness. This is an idea that was to reappear many times in both his poems and his letters. In his famous Nightingale Ode, he asks at the end: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music; --Do I wake or sleep?" [2] And in a letter to Charles Brown, as late as September 30, 1820, when Keats was dying on his way to Italy, he questioned: "Is there another Life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream?" Here in "On Death," death is dissociated from sleep, and is associated with rebirth or awakening: "Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream," and "His future doom which is but to awake." Death is preferable to life, which is here a "life of woe," a "rugged path," a life where "transient pleasures as a vision seem." In spite of the misery of life, however, there is suggested in this poem something of the fear and undesirability of death. Keats notes that it is strange for man to roam on earth which is a "rugged path," while on the other hand, man dare not "view alone/ His future doom." But man's "future doom" is to be awake, presumably after death, thus assuming a state of immortality or rebirth. With this qualification, the poem is basically one which associates

death with a desirable state, here a state of wakefulness, implying rebirth. But the concept is only barely outlined and still undeveloped.

Keats' first work of major importance was his long poem, Endymion, which occupied him from April 1817 to April 1818. It was a discouraging time, and the fact that Keats had set himself the almost insurmountable task of "mak[ing] 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill[ing] them with Poetry" (October 8, 1817 to Benjamin Bailey) did not help matters. He himself said that it would be "a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention." Because of this and other difficulties, both the letters of this period and the poem itself express Keats' developing attitude toward death. The task of writing was so formidable at times, and the poet was often in such a fevered despairing frame of mind, that it caused him to write to Haydon: "I am extremely glad that a time must come when every thing will leave not a wrack behind" (May 11, 1817). Earlier in the same letter, he had written: "It cannot be long first the endeavor of this present breath will soon be over--and yet it is as well to breathe freely during our sojourn." Keats also wrote: "However I must think that difficulties nerve the Spirit of a Man--they make our Prime Objects a Refuge as well as a Passion." He has

already begun to realize the necessity for suffering and pain as part of life. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey on November 3, Keats wrote: "The thought that we are mortal makes us groan." And in another letter to Bailey on November 22, Keats expressed his opinion on life after death: "We shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated." To Reynolds, Keats gave voice to his feelings about the difficulties of life, especially for those with sensitive natures: "a man should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world" (November 22).

Since Endymion occupied so much of Keats' time, the poem reveals certain changes in the poet's ideas from the beginning to the end. In the attitude toward death, the poet developed with the poem because there is here not simply a movement toward an acceptance of death; there is also evidence of the rejection of death in favor of life and love. In other words, the association of death both with things desirable and with things undesirable is present in this poem. As one critic has said: "As early as Endymion, the supreme luxury of death has been added to 'verse, fame, and beauty'." [3] Therefore, the working and the turmoil of Keats' mind, which was not yet fully developed, are plainly evident here.

The concept of rebirth in this poem is linked with love since it is through love that Endymion is finally reborn. From the very beginning of the poem, death is associated with sleep and dreams, and conversely, with awakening or rebirth which in turn suggest immortality. It is not within the scope of this thesis to trace Keats' use of dreams. Suffice it to say, however, that in Endymion Keats uses the dream device for the most part in contrast to the state of reality. But just as in The Eve of St. Agnes, so here does dream often become reality. Endymion "Beheld awake his very dream" (IV, l. 436). Keats' first use of the dream device was, as we have noted, in his poem written on the occasion of the death of his grandmother. In that poem, reality and dream were reversed. Life was the dream and death the reality, the rebirth, the state of wakefulness. Here, in his dream of Cynthia, which becomes a reality upon awakening, death is the dream and life and love the reality. Thus, the awakening from the dream constitutes a rebirth into life.

In using the Venus and Adonis myth in the second book, Keats compares death with its counterfeit, sleep: "Medicined death to a lengthened drowsiness;/ The which she fills with visions, and doth dress/ In all this quiet luxury" (ll. 484-486). From sleep comes new life: "Once more sweet life begin!" (l. 506) just as, in a

larger pattern, from death, whether symbolically or literally, comes rebirth. Here love is the agent of rebirth, for the loss or lack of love is now synonymous with death. In the third book, Endymion enters the realm of the dead, which is the first step toward rebirth and immortality. The self isolation in this underworld is a spiritual death, and death is solitude. [4] Glaucus, who had been condemned to immortal life without youth by Circe, wakes "as from a trance" (l. 221) "With new-born life" (l. 239) bestowed on him by the presence of the youth, Endymion. Glaucus' condition emphasizes the theme of immortality, but in a negative way since eternal life without youth is worse than death. By awakening the dead lovers, Endymion illustrates the theme of rebirth through love, and thus a kind of death of death: "Death felt it to his inwards; 'twas too much:/ Death fell a weeping in his charnel-house" (ll. 787-788). Finally, in the last book, Endymion states: "My Kingdom's at its death, and just it is/ That I should die with it" (ll. 940-941) ... nor much it grieves/ To die, when summer dies on the cold sward" (ll. 935-936). The tone is one of resignation and acceptance which comes from defeat. It is calm, but sad. But, ironically, the conclusion of Endymion is not sad, but happy. Endymion is spiritualized or reborn; by accepting death, he has gained new life, a concept

more fully delineated in Hyperion.

Upon the completion of Endymion, Keats' life was not made any easier, but in fact was fraught with misery and unhappiness. Endymion was finally published in April 1818, but instead of the fame as a poet which Keats desired, he received abuse and criticism in the form of literary attacks in the leading magazines of the day. It was in this year also that Keats was separated from his two brothers. George sailed for America in June, to return briefly only once in January 1820, and Tom died in December of the fatal disease which was all too soon to claim Keats' own young life. It is also in this year that Keats himself became aware of the first signs of approaching consumption. And to add to both his intense pleasure and intense misery, he met Fanny Brawne. It is no wonder, then, that Keats referred to life as the "pain of existence" (May 21,25, 1818 to Bailey). In June of this same year, in another letter to Bailey, Keats wrote: "I am never alone without rejoicing that there is such a thing as death--without placing my ultimate in the glory of dying for a great human purpose ... Life must be undergone." When Tom died, Keats wrote in an epistle to George and Georgiana Keats that he had "scarce a doubt of immortality of some nature or other--

neither had Tom" (December 16, 1818). He was later to express more doubt and insecurity about the reality of immortality of any kind.

By the time Keats wrote Hyperion and subsequently The Fall of Hyperion, his ideas concerning death and, conversely, his ideas about life were beginning to take more definite shape. But Keats was young, and he had not the necessary wisdom of age and experience which would have enabled him to complete the poems. Nevertheless, incomplete as they stand, they represent an important aspect in the development of Keats' ideas concerning death. The theme of rebirth in its association with death is more maturely and positively stated in these poems than in any heretofore discussed.

As in Endymion the rebirth was accomplished through love, here the agent of rebirth is knowledge. And it is knowledge of the pain and suffering and misery of the world, which Keats discovered was necessary for a total understanding of life. Thus the poet has to "die" and be reborn through suffering. This is a more complex attitude than the rebirth through love which enabled Endymion to perceive life. In the rebirth in Endymion, there was no particular suffering involved, but in Hyperion, the poet has already gained a less happy outlook on life because of his own increased knowledge of suffering

and, therefore, he recognizes the necessity for the knowledge of this misery in order for the poet to be reborn into new life. The process is essential in securing immortality for the poet. Death, then, can be viewed in two ways in the Hyperion poems. Death is, in one sense, the process by which the poet's rebirth through knowledge is accomplished. On the other hand, as evidenced in The Fall of Hyperion, knowledge is the means whereby the poet escapes or avoids or overcomes death. Thus death is again, as in Endymion, both desirable and undesirable. In other words, in both attitudes, Keats offers a choice - knowledge through death (of self) and knowledge or death (extinction).

Book III of Hyperion concerns Apollo's feelings of inadequacy and his search for knowledge and experience, which indirectly reflect Keats' own desire for the same. Apollo looks into the "eternal calm" of the eyes of Mnemosyne, who is the "eternal existence of the universe, as it were Being itself, made conscious--contains all life, past, present, to come, immanent, everlasting, pure mirror of what is." [5] Her eyes are contrasted to his own: "For me, dark, dark,/ And Painful vile oblivion seals my eyes:/ I strive to search wherefore I am so sad,/ Until a melancholy numbs my limbs:/ And then upon the grass I sit, and moan,/ Like one who once had wings" (ll. 86-91).

For Apollo, his life prior to his transformation through knowledge has been like a death, and it is only this transformation that can make him divine or immortal: "Knowledge enormous makes a God of me" (l. 113). The process itself is likened to "the struggle at the gate of death;/ Or liker still to one who should take leave/ Of pale immortal death, and with a pang/ As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse/ Die into life" (ll. 126-130). In other words, Apollo is reborn, and the death struggle is related to the birth struggle. Walter Bate suggests that "dying into life" refers to the annihilation of the self through an active sympathy with his fellow man.[6] Certainly this process of rebirth assumes a death or annihilation of self. When the poet "dies into life" or is reborn, he is no longer his former self because he now possesses knowledge.

In his sonnet on the "Elgin Marbles" written two years earlier, Keats had anticipated this death-rebirth concept. In that earlier poem, he had feared that he would die before being reborn through knowledge: "and each imagin'd pinnacle and steep/ Of godlike hardship tells me I must die/ Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky." For him, then, life was a burden: "Mortality/ Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep." But it is here a burden only because mortality is in contrast to

immortality. It is the fact of mortality, the brevity of life, which here concerns the poet because it limits the time in which the poet must be reborn through knowledge. There is in this poem a dual reference to death--an allusion to a real death, which the poet fears, and a sacramental death, or annihilation of self, a necessary step for the poet-hero to attain immortality. [7]

The Fall of Hyperion or A Dream which is, according to most critics, the later of the two Hyperion poems, was composed between August and December 1819. The poem is built around dreams and sleep and the concept of rebirth and reawakening from a state of sleep or death into life. Poets alone are able to relate dreams and thereby overcome the "live, dream and die" (l. 7) routine which ordinary mortals endure. The poet struggles with sleep until a "sense of life return'd" (l. 58). In this poem, Keats moves toward a resigned acceptance of death. Moneta's face was "Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd/ By an immortal sickness which kills not" (ll. 257-258). Death is here referred to as "happy" because it is preferable to the "immortal sickness." The visage was "deathwards progressing/ To no death ... it had pass'd/ The lily and the snow," both symbols of death. In other words, the paradox of death as part of the eternal process toward both extinction and immortality is

here felt. And yet another paradox is also evident, for death and immortality are set in opposition here, and death is preferable to immortality because of the "sickness." However, the emphasis here is not upon the desirability of death but the undesirability of the "immortal sickness." The poet's desire for knowledge is again expressed: "I ached to see what things the hollow brain/ Behind enwombed: what high tragedy/ In the dark secret Chambers of her skull/ Was acting" (ll. 276-279). By the end of this poem, Keats' own despair is seen in his now more positive acceptance and desire for death, even though death is desirable only in contrast to the misery of living. "Oftentimes I pray'd/ Intense, that Death would take me from the vale/ And all its burthens" (ll. 396-398). In the final canto of the poem, Hyperion moves toward the west, perhaps symbolical of the region of death.

Both Hyperion and The Fall of Hyperion can be viewed in terms of Keats' own development in his attitude toward death. This attitude became positive because of his own growing despair and disillusionment with life and all its miseries. The Hyperion poems do not reflect a joyful acceptance of death, but rather a resignation. According to Murry, the very acceptance of death is a "submission of the conscious self ... a bowing of the soul before the supreme misery of the world." 8

The theme of rebirth in its association with immortality and dream versus reality is also present in Keats' Ode to a Nightingale. However, the major import of the poem lies in its emphasis on escape from the harsh realities of life to the peace which death would bring. I choose to discuss the poem as a whole and, therefore, relegate it to the later discussion of death in its relationship to peace.

To Autumn, which portrays the concept of death in its association with peace and calm, will also be discussed later. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that this poem, as well as being Keats' final word on his acceptance of death in relation to the concept of peace, is also the final word on the relationship between death and rebirth. For autumn, which would logically be associated with death, or at least a prelude to the end of things, is here a rich, full time and as such, it suggests the beginning, the renewal, the rebirth which is to come as part of the natural process of things. Thus the development toward a positive acceptance of death is here evidenced through the concept of rebirth. But it is more than a mere acceptance of death; it is, paradoxically, a definite statement of hope and life, suggestive of immortality.

The relationship of love with death was for Keats

a most important association. And it was one which became even more important as his love for Fanny Brawne increased while at the same time, his own life was slowly ebbing away. The concept of love, more than any other, Keats variously associated positively and negatively with death. Either he intensely desired death because of love or, conversely, he intensely desired life because of love. Allen Tate says: "Keats was filled with the compulsive image of the identification of death and the act of love ... and it is only an exaggeration of emphasis to say that death and love are interchangeable terms throughout his poetry." [9] But De Selincourt finds rather a clash than a fusion. He says: "Love and death; from the clash of these two supreme experiences, the genius of Keats reached its brief but splendid consummation." [10]

A development toward a mature association of death with love can be seen in the poetry and letters of Keats. For example, "Hither, hither, love" is not an important poem in itself, but it does form the beginning of Keats' association of death with love. Here it is in rudimentary form, undeveloped, but nevertheless essential as expressing the germ of an important concept. The idea is expressed in the last stanza: "Hither, hither, hither/ Love this boon hath sent--/ If I die and wither/ I shall die content."

The linking of death with love is better illu-

minated in Endymion. One critic has stated that the theme of Endymion is the "quest of an everlasting erotism" [11] suggested by Cynthia's words in the second book: "An immortality of passion's thine" (l. 808). In other words, love is endlessly repeated after death. In the second book, Venus espies Endymion despairing because of love "even as though/ Death had come sudden" (ll. 565-566). Love makes Endymion feel immortal: "Yet still I feel immortal! O my love,/ My breath of life" (ll. 686-687). At the end of the poem, Endymion repents his having loved a goddess with the hope of immortality when he should have set his sights on a mortal love. For the first time, the desirability of the simultaneity of love and death is expressed by the Indian Maid: "We might embrace and die: voluptuous thought!" (l. 759).

Endymion has learned a lesson from his experiences, however. His goddess, Cynthia, is synonymous with the "dark-eyed stranger;" i.e., the human and the divine are united, and it is only through human love that man can attain to the divine or ideal love. Douglas Bush, in his Mythology and the Romantic Tradition, restates this idea that only through participation in the actual world of human life can the ideal be realized. [12] And Foakes, in his The Romantic Assertion, views Endymion as a vision of love. He states that the attainment of

immortality lies through the destruction of the self, when man has become one with something greater than himself. The poet must suffer a kind of death before he can reach perfect happiness, and since he has experienced a higher than earthly joy, nought remains but death. Thus, through the acceptance of death, the hero is reborn and attains immortality by absorption into a unifying love. [13]

The association of death with love in Endymion is, for the most part, negative rather than positive. Love is in opposition to death; i.e., death means an end to love. Keats at this point is not ready to accept the two simultaneously. Therefore, the major discussion of Endymion will fall in the second part of the thesis.

Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne played such an important part in his life, his poetry, and his letters, that it is necessary to devote special attention to it. It was this relationship more than any other that influenced Keats' ideas concerning Love, Beauty, and Death. Just as the two opposing attitudes toward death are present in much of Keats' poetry and letters, so are they present in his letters to Fanny Brawne. The only difference between his letters to her and those to his friends is that both these attitudes are more intensely expressed in his relationship with her.

Her beauty inspired his love, and thus he associates these two abstract qualities in her person: "I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty" (July 8, 1819). Keats also directly associates his love with the highest pleasure: "You and pleasure take possession of me at the same moment" (July 15). This pleasure is soon directly changed into a desire for death, thereby positively relating death with pleasure: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute" (July 25). In the beginning of the same letter, Keats despairs: "You cannot conceive how I ache to be with you: how I would die for one hour---for what is in the world?"

To Fanny, Keats poured out his vexation with life and his despair at the miseries of the world. "I am a little given to bode ill like the raven; it is my misfortune not my fault; it has proceeded from the general tenor of the circumstances of my life, and rendered every event suspicious" (July 15). And later, he wrote: "I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it" (July 25). In another letter, written in August, Keats talked of "my uneasy spirits--my unguess'd fate--all spread as a veil between me

and you ... You see how I go on ... I am not happy enough for silken Phrases, and silver sentences" (August 16). In September, Keats unhappily acknowledged the fact that he knows his "life must be passed in fatigue and trouble," and because of this knowledge, he "cannot bear the pain of being happy" (September 13). In two letters written in October, Keats again positively relates love and death. In the first of these letters, he writes to Fanny: "I could be martyr'd for my Religion--Love is my religion--I could die for that--I could die for you." In the second, he says: "I shold like to cast the die for Love or death" (October 13,19). Keats' association of death with love developed most positively, then, in his correspondence with Fanny Brawne. The agony of unfulfilled love and the despair and frustration he suffered emerge in these letters in the form of a positive longing for death, and a definite linking of death with love.

Keats' association of death with the transiency of pleasure must begin with another poem written on the occasion of the death of his grandmother. In "As From the Darkening Gloom," Keats had not really begun to realize that pain and pleasure are linked, and that the very passing or ceasing of pleasure was a kind of death. "As From the Darkening Gloom" expresses some of the conventional Christian concepts and symbols of the artificial

eighteenth century style. [14] Death is here desirable, but the poem lacks the depth of maturity in its attitude toward death which comes only with deeper knowledge and experience of suffering. The "realms above" are described as "Regions of peace and everlasting love;/ Where happy spirits ... Taste the high joy none but the blest can prove." Keats writes of the "immortal quire," "Heaven fair," "superior bliss," and "circlets bright/ Of starry beam." He asks: "What pleasure's higher?," a question he might well ask later in his life, but with deeper significance. The last line ("Wherefore does any grief our joy impair") implies that there should be no grief, but only unalloyed joy at the thought of death, which, at this point, meant to Keats a state in the blissful "realms above." It was only later that Keats came to realize that joy and grief are necessarily mingled, even in his attitude toward death.

"Hither, hither, love" is another poem which expresses Keats' ideas on the transiency of pleasure, an attitude only fully realized and expressed in the Ode on Melancholy. But it is here stated: "though one moment's pleasure/ In one moment flies,/ Though the passion's treasure/ In one moment dies." In a letter to Benjamin Bailey on November 22, 1817, Keats again writes of the transiency of pleasure, a knowledge which depressed and

frustrated him: "I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness--I look not for it if it be not in the present hour--nothing startles me beyond the Moment." As financial and personal difficulties, including the pains of creation, weighed more heavily upon Keats, he came to realize that such a thing as happiness was not to be had on anything other than a temporary basis. In a letter to his publisher, John Taylor, April 24, 1818, he wrote: "Young Men for some time have an idea that such a thing as happiness is to be had and therefore are extremely impatient under any unpleasant restraining--in time, however, of such stuff is the world about them, they know better and instead of striving from uneasiness greet it as an habitual sensation, a pannier which is to weigh upon them through life." Keats' gradual acceptance of death parallels his gradual rejection, through knowledge and experience, of the possibility of any permanent happiness on earth.

In the second book of Endymion, love is the agent whereby Endymion learns of the transiency of joy and pleasure, an idea more fully expressed in his Ode on a Grecian Urn. Endymion questions why he cannot forever have his love, but he knows that she "[will] steal/ Away from [him] again, indeed, indeed" (ll. 745-746). Love is associated with life: "Until we taste the life of love

again" (l. 772) but both life and love evoke the expression: "O bliss! O pain!" (l. 773). And Endymion's love "is grief contain'd/ In the very deeps of pleasure" (ll. 823-824). The juxtaposition of grief and pleasure is an idea which continues to haunt Keats throughout his life, culminating in his Ode on Melancholy which bears the poet's most complete expression of it.

The Indian Maiden's Song to Sorrow in the last book of Endymion outlines Keats' growing acceptance of suffering and sorrow as a necessary part of life. In it the poet finally embraces and loves sorrow.

> Come then, Sorrow!
> Sweetest Sorrow!
> Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast:
> I thought to leave thee
> And deceive thee,
> But now of all the world I love thee best.

Certainly this is a positive statement invoking and embracing what would logically be conceived of as negative. This passage anticipates the recognition of the beauty of sorrow which Keats expresses in Hyperion: "How beautiful, if sorrow had not made/ Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self" (I, ll. 35-36). The juxtaposition of sorrow with joy is once again expressed in a question: "Is there nought for me,/ Upon the bourne of bliss, but misery?" (ll. 460-461).

Both the Ode on a Grecian Urn and the Ode on Melancholy are included in this thesis because of an indirect, rather than a direct, relationship to death. Heretofore, death has referred to the death of man. In these two odes, however, death refers to the passing or ceasing of Beauty, a theme directly stated in the Ode on Melancholy and antithetically stated through the Urn. Both poems represent a development in Keats' association of death with the transiency of pleasure, a concept which is most maturely and fully expressed in the Ode on Melancholy.

Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn and his Ode to a Nightingale embody two aspects of the theme of the permanence of beauty. In one, the permanence is found in the song of the nightingale which is immortal, and in the other, permanence is found through art. But here the similarity ends. For the theme of the Ode on a Grecian Urn is that of art as opposed to life, of a fixed immortality as opposed to a changing mortality. The urn has not satisfactorily answered Keats' question about the permanence of pleasure, for it presents a permanence that is static, even though it is desirable. Beauty has been frozen on the urn beyond all limitations of time, and the poet says: "Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave/ Thy song, nor ever can those trees be

bare;/ Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,/ Though winning near the goal." However, the emphasis in this poem is on the preference of the frozen art to the "breathing human passion .../ That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,/ A burning forehead, and a parching tongue." For he tells the lover not to grieve: "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,/ For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" Even though Keats refers to the urn as "Cold Pastoral!," he is nevertheless aware of the importance of the urn through its permanence. He addresses the urn thus: "When old age shall this generation waste,/ Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/ Than ours, a friend to man." The ode, then, in its promise of immortality through the permanence of art, is almost a challenge to death, in this case, the death or passing of beauty. The mood of the poem is a happy one, and the urn provides a solution, if not the solution, for Keats' ever perplexing dilemma about the permanence and transiency of beauty.

This theme of the inevitable passing of pleasure and beauty finds its most complete expression in the Ode on Melancholy. This ode is, in a sense, the counterpart to the Ode on a Grecian Urn since it extols the beauty of sorrow and melancholy, thus shifting the emphasis from the search for permanence to the acceptance of imper-

manence. But it is a difficult idea to accept, and Keats, in a letter to Reynolds back in September 1818, advised his friend to "think at Present of nothing but pleasure 'Gather the rose &c' Gorge the honey of life. I pity you as much that it cannot last for ever" (September 22). In a letter to his brother, written closer to the time of the composition of the ode, Keats expressed the exact idea which he treats in the poem. He wrote: "we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure--Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting--While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events--While we are laughing it sprouts it grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck" (March 19, 1819). These words foreshadow the lines in the third stanza: "and aching Pleasure nigh,/ Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips."

In the first stanza of the ode, the poet admonishes the reader not to avoid the "wakeful anguish of the soul" by seeking the various symbols of death which he here lists.[15] Rather, he suggests in the second stanza that "when the melancholy fit shall fall ... Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose," etc. The use of the word "glut" emphasizes the sensuousness, the intensity, and the richness of the poet's feeling. The images which Keats uses as examples--"a morning rose ... the rainbow

of the salt sand-wave ... the wealth of globed peonies ... the peerless eyes" of his mistress -- are all evanescent things, examples of "Beauty that must die." Paradoxically, then, it is these very things which cause the melancholy fit because their beauty is not lasting, and yet it is these things which must be sought as a cure for melancholy. We notice, too, the contrast implied through the "April shroud," the incongruity of death in springtime, the time of rebirth.

It is in the final stanza, however, that Keats positively expresses the concept of the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain. Joy's "hand is ever at his lips/ Bidding adieu;" pleasure is referred to as "aching Pleasure," which also is "Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips." Keats asserts: "Ay, in the very temple of Delight/ Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine." But he adds, Melancholy can be "seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine." In other words, only those who have experienced Joy in its utmost intensity can know Melancholy, which sits in the very place with Joy. Only "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,/ And be among her cloudy trophies hung." Garrod comments that "these supreme moments of poetry are rare ... when the soul is so truly captivated by beauty, by that paradox of simul-

taneous unfolding and fading which constitutes the glory of the sensuous world, that she is left a trophy hung in the shrine of impenetrable sadness." [16] Keats, then, has come to accept the evanescence of beauty and pleasure in life. More than this, he does not mourn the passing or the death of such beauty because he can now recognize it as a necessary part of life. It is part of the search, the knowledge which the poet requires, and the awareness of suffering. In order to know the height of pleasure, one must also know the height (or depth) of melancholy. As in Hyperion, one must die in order to be reborn.

One of the most important aspects of Keats' developing attitude toward an acceptance of death is the association of death with peace, ease, and calm. So much of his life was fraught with misery, hardship, frustration, despair, and pain that Keats finally came to view death as the ultimate haven of peace. His poetry and letters are filled with this longing for quiet and peace. One of the first expressions of this longing, although not yet directly related to death, is found in a sonnet, "To My Brothers," written November 18, 1816. The imagery suggests the mood of quietness in such words and phrases as "silence," "whispers," "gentle," "poetic sleep," "smoothly," "quietly," "gently whisp'ring noise," "calmly." Keats' attitude is calm, but although he is already be-

ginning to recognize the relationship of death with final peace, there is also no doubt that, at this point, life is more important than death. In reality, of course, Keats desires this peace and calm in his life here on earth. Thus the expression of this desire in the last four lines only heightens the tragedy, pathos, and irony of the subsequent course of events of Keats' life.

> Many such eves of gently whisp'ring noise
> May we together pass, and calmly try
> What are this world's true joys, -- ere the great voice,
> From its fair face, shall bid our spirits fly.

The first definite link between the longing for ease with death, and also perhaps the first mature expression of the positive acceptance of death, comes in a sonnet which Keats wrote on January 31, 1817 called "After dark vapours." The mood of the poem embraces the sense of calm which comes "After dark vapours have oppress'd our plains/ For a long dreary season" while the images express this mood of quietness. "Calmest thoughts" include such things as "leaves/ Budding,--fruit ripening in stillness ... quiet sheaves ... a sleeping infant's breath,--/ The gradual sand that through an hour-glass runs." The final image is "a Poet's death," which thus reinforces the association between death and the sense of quietness. In a letter to Leigh Hunt on May 10 of

this same year, Keats bitterly alludes to this image, but in a different sense. He says: "Tell him there are strange Stories of the death of Poets--some have died before they were conceived." Of course, by the time he wrote this letter, and even the poem, Keats had experienced some of the many "dark vapours" that were to "oppress [his] plains for a long dreary season." Just six months before writing this sonnet, Keats had qualified to practice as apothecary, physician, and surgeon, a career which he was never really to pursue. In these few short months, then, his whole life had taken a completely different turn, and by the time that he had written the letter mentioned above, he had already published his first volume of poems, the public indifference to which was only the beginning of many disappointments for the young poet. Therefore it is already logical that death in this sonnet should represent a desirable end, and that the image of death should climax the poem. One critic sees the poet as the link between nature and man in this poem because the poet is best able to perceive and transmit the beauty of nature to his fellow men. Consequently, a poet's death is the agent which unites the nature cycle (birth and death in the seasons of the year; i.e., spring to winter) and the cycle of human life (birth, progress, death) because if the poet, as the representative of

nature to man, dies, then nature itself dies to man. The poet's death would then be synonymous with the death of nature in winter, an image omitted in the poem. Baumgartner suggests that by implication, death leads the poet into eternal spring or symbolically to ideal Beauty. [17] The poem would seem to associate death with a longing for peace and quietness rather than with a search for ideal Beauty, however. The poem also anticipates To Autumn in its images and in its mention of "fruition (and ultimate death) that will follow the Spring." [18]

In Endymion also, the ultimate goal for Keats is peace which he states emphatically and positively: "But the crown/ Of all my life was utmost quietude" (III, ll. 352-353). In the first book, Keats asserts that it is Beauty that brings the desirable essences which Keats associates with death -- quiet, sleep, and dreams.

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
> (ll. 1-5)

And it is beauty that "in spite of all (the inhuman dearth/ Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,/ Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways/ Made for our searching) ... moves away the pall/ From our dark spirits" (ll. 8-13). These

things of beauty are first of all things of nature, but with increased maturity and knowledge of the misery of the world, the things of beauty also include love, sorrow, and finally death, suggested through calm or peace.

As Keats drew near the end of his long poem, the despair which he felt at the difficulties it had presented him is evident: "Long have I sought for rest" (IV, l. 879). The attitude toward death in the fourth book, then, is one of more or less calm resignation and acceptance. But it is still not the total acceptance which comes to Keats later. There is tragic irony which reflects on Keats' own death in the plea of Endymion to die at home: "Yet I would have, great gods! but one short hour/ Of native air--let me but die at home" (ll. 36-37). Already Keats had begun to realize that he would not have the peace he sought until death claimed him.

"Why Did I Laugh," written March 1819, illustrates one of the most powerful expressions of Keats' positive attitude toward death. In this sonnet, death is associated with intensity. The poem was not written out of despair, but rather from a strength which Keats inwardly possessed. He himself said of the poem: "it was written with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of any thing but knowledge when pushed to the point though the first steps to it were through my human passions--

they went away, and I wrote with my Mind--and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart" (March 19, 1819 to the George Keatses). Although Keats refers to life as "mortal pain" and "Darkness," he is still very much aware of the pleasures and the brevity of life: "I know this Being's lease,/ My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads." In spite of life's pleasures, however, the poet is ready to give up all: "Yet would I on this very midnight cease," a line which anticipates the Ode to a Nightingale in which this theme of death is more fully expressed. Keats chooses Death on the basis of its intensity: "Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed,/ But Death intenser." This statement embodies a decided change from some of his ideas expressed earlier. In a letter to his brothers in December 1817, Keats had said: "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (December 21). The conclusion to which he comes is that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration" (December 27). In this poem, Keats specifically rejects Beauty, along with Fame and Verse, three things which had become extremely important to him, in favor of Death.

There is evidence in this sonnet of another per-

plexing attitude. The poet does not know why he should laugh when he is aware of the truth that man can never achieve the knowledge or find the answers to the questions he asks all his life. At best, he can only turn to his heart for the answer, but even this is in vain: "Heart! Thou and I are here sad and alone ... ever must I moan,/ To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain." Death, then, is more than an escape from the misery of life and the futility of the search for knowledge; it is the highest reward of life that is possible: "Death is Life's high meed." Aileen Ward also comments on this change in Keats' attitude. Death need not be "the negation of all the struggles of life but the supreme experience 'intenser' than all the others ... the resolution of all those doubts which can never be settled in life itself." [19] Keats had reached the conclusion that "a life without intensity, without light and shade, was hardly worth living. Darkness itself was preferable, the darkness of his own unanswered questions in which he still groped toward the light which he still believed was there." [20]

The desire for peace and calm which Keats searched for all his life continued to manifest itself throughout his poetry and letters. One such example is a sonnet called "To Sleep," which was written in Aptil 1819. Sleep is death's counterfeit, as the imagery of the poem

implies. Words and phrases such as "embalmer," "embower'd from the light," "enshaded," "poppy," "hushed casket" set the tone of the poem with their obvious allusions to death. The poet pleads for sleep as if he were pleading for death: "O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,/ In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes, ... Then save me, or the passed day will shine/ Upon my pillow, breeding many woes," and finally, "Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,/ And seal the hushed casket of my soul." Keats knew that both sleep and ultimately death would bring the peace from the woes and cares of the world. Here "death is not a doubtful blessing and release but the luxury of a pleasant sensation." [21]

The mood and tone of quietness and death is obvious at the outset of the first book of Hyperion. Saturn is described as "Quiet as a stone,/ Still as the silence." The setting is the "shady sadness of a vale/ Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn." Words such as "dead leaf," "voiceless," "deadened" merely add to the already despairing tone. The immortal gods fall because they exhibit passions of mortals who die. In other words, the misery of life or mortality is contrasted with the calm, passionlessness, ease, and peace of divinity or immortality. Hyperion says: "The blaze, the splendor,

and the symmetry/ I cannot see--but darkness, death and darkness" (ll. 241-242).

The mood of the second book is also suggestive of death, with the older gods "scarce images of life" (l. 33). Much of the description of the fallen gods can be related to Keats' own mood and frame of mind: "the supreme God/ At war with all the frailty of grief,/ Of rage, of fear, anxiety, revenge,/ Remorse, spleen, hope, but most of all despair" (ll. 92-95). The poet here pours his own heart and soul into his poetry. Through the words of Clymene, Keats echoes his own desire for peace: "I stood upon a shore, a pleasant shore,/ Where a sweet clime was breathed from a land/ Of fragrance, quietness, and trees, and flowers./ Full of calm joy it was, as I of grief" (ll. 262-265).

Strangely enough, it was in the spring of 1819, the time in which Keats reached his greatest poetic heights by writing his finest poetry, that he also wrote most positively of death. His attitude had developed and matured and his increased experience and suffering had made him recognize, more intensely than ever, the positive, desirable qualities of death. His desire for knowledge had also brought him to the same conclusion.

It is in the Ode to a Nightingale that his most profound and most positive acceptance of death is felt.

And yet, even here, a paradox exists in that the poet is now, as always, torn between the great hope of peace which death would bring and the intense desire for life. Nevertheless, the expression is complete and there are allusions and references to death in almost every stanza. The movement of the ode is into the world of the nightingale, which is a movement toward death. [22] As such, it is an attempted escape from the reality of the miseries of life. And yet, the poet knows that there can be no escape.

The words in the first stanza suggest sleep, death, and oblivion: "aches," "drowsy numbness," "hemlock" (a death potion), "opiate." [23] The suggestion of escape is strongly present in this stanza through these very images. The feelings of the poet are all extreme, intense; the poet is "too happy" in the happiness of the bird. According to one critic the "drowsy numbness" is "both an aching pain and a too-sharp happiness; hearing the song induces Keats to forget and also to remember what is unhappy in life--it brings oblivion that, at a deeper level, is keener knowledge." [24] In the second stanza, the poet desires to "drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And ... fade away into the forest dim" with the nightingale in an attempt to escape the "weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear

each other groan," expressed in the third stanza. The imagery of the second, as well as the fifth stanza, is deceivingly rich and sensuous, full of a sense of life rather than death; for in truth, the poet, in the second stanza, is calling for a potion that will enable him to escape life. Stanzas four and five contain images of darkness. In stanza four, the poet will escape, not by means of the wine or the drug which he desired in the first two stanzas, but rather "on the viewless wings of Poesy." But he discovers that "here there is no light," and in the fifth stanza, the poet says: "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet ... But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet." The suggestions of death are obvious.

The paradox concerning death which haunted Keats throughout his life is embodied in the next two stanzas of the ode. The misery of life is here contrasted with death or ease. The poet writes: "for many a time/ I have been half in love with easeful Death ... Now more than ever seems it rich to die." But although it would seem the greatest joy to die at this moment of ecstasy: "To cease upon the midnight with no pain,/ While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad/ In such an ecstasy," the poet is nonetheless aware that the song would continue after he would no longer be able to hear it: "Still

wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain--/ To thy high requiem become a sod." Death is therefore both desirable and undesirable at the same time.

Thus we come to the seventh stanza in which there is a change from the particular to the universal. Death is here contrasted to immortality, and the bird has become symbolical as well as literal. The nightingale is immortal, the universal symbol of everything opposing mortal life, "the weariness, the fever, and the fret." The stanza begins triumphantly: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" and ends forlornly, thus linking it with the final stanza in which the poet emerges from his dream back into his conscious self. The word "forlorn" is used in the first instance to mean "unfrequented or desolate" and in the second instance to suggest loneliness and isolation. The word reminds Keats of his own state,[26] and the eventual necessity for returning from dream to reality. The tolling bell and the song of the bird which is "buried deep" again serve as reminders of death. Keats questions the fancy for not performing its function in keeping reality away because the song of the nightingale has faded. The final question of the ode is one which involves the disparity between dream and reality: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream/ Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?"

The Ode to a Nightingale, then, remains a beautiful paradox, highly suggestive of the sensitive, troubled mind of the young man who composed it. It is, in part, a triumph song to Death, and in part, a song of despair. [27] In it "the world of the imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast." [28] Through the ode, Keats suggests that death is the supreme moment, the final intensity and sensation. [29] Thus, the momentary experience may be fleeting (the song of the nightingale, in this case), an idea expressed in all the odes, but the "ideal embodiment of the moment in art or song is a constant source of joy." [30] Finally, the poem is a tribute to beauty, as it is also a plea for the peace which death would bring and the immortality symbolized by the song of the nightingale.

Considered by many to be Keats' finest poem, To Autumn, composed September 19, 1819, is the culmination, the final resignation, the end to the search for peace and calm for the poet. Insofar as Keats elsewhere relates death with calm and peace, the concept of death is important here. Keats looks forward to a time "when quiet will become more pleasant to him than the World" (September 21, 1819 to the George Keatses). Autumn, with

its connotations of finality, symbolizes for Keats the acceptance of the approaching winter or death. This calm, positive attitude is evinced in his account of how he came to compose the poem: "How beautiful the season is now--How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather--Dian skies--I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now--Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm ... this struck me so much in my sunday's walk that I composed upon it" (September 21, 1819 to Reynolds).

The desirable quality of the season does not go unnoticed. The poet here prefers the autumn season which he finds "warm" to the "chilly green of the spring." The poem itself suggests a kind of resignation, a calm acceptance of death as an inevitable part of life. It is interesting to note that just two days later, Keats wrote to his brother that he had "lost that poetic ardour and fire ... I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power ... I want to compose without this fever, I hope I one day shall." The fact that he had just composed one of his greatest poems embracing a calm which for him was the end of life is ironic. Death, or autumn, has its own music which differs from, but is not necessarily less important than, the music of spring or life. The first stanza is richly sensuous, suggesting

the fullness of life at its highest intensity. The imagery enhances the theme: "fruitfulness," "maturing sun," "load and bless/ With fruit," "To bend with apples," "fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;/ To swell the gourd," "plump the hazel shells," "to set budding more,/ And still more," "o'er-brimm'd." Here is life depicted at its very richest and fullest moment, thus providing a strange contrast to the underlying theme of approaching death. The tone of the second stanza, with its unhurried quality, suggests a state of indolence. The image of Autumn "sound asleep,/ Drows'd with the fume of poppies" carries with it the obvious connotations of death. Autumn is here both a "gleaner," and one who "watchest the last oozings hours by hours," a line which suggests a desire to drain every drop from life before it is over.

The third stanza is beautiful in the extreme, and these lines which capture the subtleties of the poet's mood must assuredly remain as some of his finest poetry. The poet does not here mourn the absence of the "songs of Spring," although one critic finds that this line is the key to the whole poem because it suggests that the poem expresses more than a "simple mood of satisfied fulfillment." [31] The day is "soft-dying," implying a gentle rather than a violent mood. The words "bloom" and "touch" and "rosy" which describe the "soft-dying

day" are suggestive of life, thereby providing contrast. The "small gnats mourn," little things which are subject to the chance of the wind. They are "borne aloft/ Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." Perhaps Keats was here thinking of the rise and fall of his own life, which was so subject to various circumstance. Or, perhaps, as one critic suggests, the gnats symbolize the rising and falling of generations, i.e., the falling of the "generation that has been fruitful and the rising of the generation which is its fruit." [32] This is essentially the theme of the fallen gods who are replaced by a new order of beauty in Hyperion. The music of autumn is abundant--the "gnats mourn," the "lambs loud bleat," the "hedge-crickets sing," the "red-breast whistles," and the "swallows twitter." The final line of the poem ("and gathering swallows twitter in the skies") suggests once again the approach of winter or death by its indirect allusion to the migration of the birds. But it is a time of fulfillment, and, in the process or nature of things, the end which is death presages a beginning, a rebirth, a renewal. The poem finally suggests a calm, mature acceptance of death, an acceptance which could come to Keats only after the knowledge of the misery of life made him realize more completely than ever the importance of the relationship between death and peace.

Keats' life was, for the most part, not a happy one. He had more than his share of the sufferings, miseries, and anxieties of the world, and it is small wonder that he should have expressed many doubts concerning both life and death. The correspondence of the last two years of his life is filled with despair and question. He considers death as both desirable and undesirable. Near the end of his life, his desire for death was often a result of extreme weariness. In a letter to his friend Charles Brown in June 1820, he wrote that he was "too weary of the world" (June 21). There is pathos in the hope he tried to hold out to his sister for the affairs of his family: "We have been so unfortunate for so long a time, every event has been of so depressing a nature that I must persuade myself to think some change will take place in the aspect of our affairs. I shall be upon the look out for a trump card" (July 22, 1820). To Fanny Brawne he expressed bitterness, caused by his weariness with the world: "I should like to give up the matter at once--I should like to die. I am sickened at the brute world--I hate men and women more. I see nothing but thorns for the future" (August 1820). He could not bear the intensity of being happy, only to be forced back into gloom again, and he knew that he would never be able to be happy with Fanny. This certain knowledge led him to

assert: "The world is too brutal for me--I am glad there is such a thing as the grave--I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there." This reinforces and reiterates Keats' intense longing for peace.

Keats' final feelings about death as he lay dying in Rome come to us through his devoted friend, Joseph Severn, who cared for the poet in his last days. There is no doubt that near the end Keats positively longed for death. "O! that my last hour was come," he implored, but he did not understand why he had to die without comfort or even hope or faith in immortality: "this last cheap comfort--which every rogue and fool have--is deny'd me in my last moments--why is this--! I have serv'd every one with my utmost good--yet why is this--I cannot understand this" (January 15, 1821, Severn to Haslam). On January 26, just a few weeks before his death, Severn writes: "Keats is desiring his death with dreadfull earnestness--the idea of death seems his only comfort--the only prospect of ease--he talks of it with delight" (January 25, Severn to Taylor). And finally, Severn relates the tragic words of Keats in his final hours: "I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave--thank God for the quiet grave--O! I can feel the cold earth upon me--the daisies growing over me--O for this quiet--it will be my first" (March 6, Severn to Taylor). The peace

which Keats sought for all his short life was finally to be his for the first time--in death.

The development of Keats' association of death with things desirable was a gradual one, and his final acceptance of death came only after much pain and suffering in life. But the development is clearly indicated within each one of the four groups discussed here. In his association of death with the concept of rebirth, Keats moves from the naive, immature position stated in "On Death" to the final mature concept of rebirth in To Autumn. In his relationship of death with love, Keats ultimately positively desired both love and death simultaneously, a feeling most convincingly expressed in his letters to Fanny Brawne. Keats also moves from an admission of the mere existence of the transiency of pleasure and joy and beauty to the recognition of the positive desire for the knowledge of both pleasure and pain of the Ode on Melancholy. And finally, Keats moves from a reluctant resignation to the peace which would accompany death to a full, mature, and positive acceptance of this peace, only fully understood in his last tribute to life, and, paradoxically, to death -- his poem To Autumn.

PART II

KEATS' ASSOCIATION OF DEATH WITH THINGS UNDESIRABLE

The association of death with things undesirable, if not as unique as Keats' association of death with things desirable, is nevertheless an important aspect of the poet's attitude toward death. It is important as contrast and as evidence of a mind in turmoil, a mind constantly searching for answers. Of course, it is the more expected, the more natural attitude, for it is only logical for man to desire life and shun death. Keats' association of death with undesirable qualities or his rejection of death is not, however, necessarily born out of a hatred or fear of death. Rather, it is a result of his intense desire to live and the fullness, the richness, that a sensitive soul such as his experiences in living intensely. It is this that makes his attitude all the more tragic, and thus gives point to the alternative attitude, the acceptance of death which finally dominates his whole concept.

There is no particular development in Keats' attitude concerning the concept of death as undesirable, or in the association of the undesirability of death with other concepts. It is true that just as Keats associated the desirability of death with rebirth, love, the transiency of pleasure, and a sense of calm, so to a certain extent, he associated the undesirability of death with these same concepts. Death is negative in that it is

associated with fear, with the conflict between a longing desire for life on the one hand and peace through death on the other, and with the very fact that death means an end to any possible further achievement. However, these associations are not important in themselves or in showing a development toward an acceptance, or rejection, in this case, of death. The main purpose of this part is to emphasize the fact that while Keats' poems and letters indicate a growing development toward a gradual acceptance of death or association of death with things desirable, his poems and letters also show a continued rejection of death. In other words, while Keats was moving in one direction toward an acceptance of death, he was simultaneously resisting this movement. This conflict is evident in Keats' poetry and letters throughout his life. Therefore, the organization of this part of the thesis will be chronological, rather than topical as in the first part, to better illustrate that this undercurrent in Keats' concept of death was a continuing one throughout his writing career. There will be one or two exceptions when, for the sake of clarity, the chronological method will not be strictly followed.

The first instance in which Keats portrays death as undesirable is a sonnet written in 1815 in memory of

Thomas Chatterton. The poem proves to be a tragic, ironic comment on the short life of Keats himself, with many of the phrases echoing, almost mocking, the fate which is to befall the young poet. It is almost as if Keats were writing of himself--"how very sad thy fate!," "Dear child of sorrow--son of misery!," "How soon the film of death obscur'd that eye," "How soon that voice, majestic and elate,/ Melted in dying numbers!," "Oh! how nigh/ Was night to thy fair morning," "Thou didst die/ A half-blown flow'ret which cold blasts amate." The lines: "On earth the good man base detraction bars/ From thy fair name, and waters it with tears" painfully remind us of the harsh criticism that fell to Keats' own name. The attitude toward death and life after death is here naive and immature, reminding us of his early poems written on the occasion of the death of his grandmother. His belief in immortality is conventional and undeveloped. He writes: "thou art among the stars/ Of highest Heaven: to the rolling sphere/ Thou sweetly singest."

Sleep and Poetry, written in the autumn and winter of 1816, deals mainly with Keats' aspirations as a poet. His desire to achieve immortality through his poetry necessarily negates a positive acceptance of death at this point. The poet invokes sleep, the counterfeit of death,

and here the escape from reality into a world of dreams, to aid him in achieving his high aim of poetry. His dreams are self-explanatory: "To see the laurel wreath, on high suspended,/ That is to crown our name when life is ended" (ll. 35-36). We recall here Keats' earlier poem, "To a Young Lady Who Sent Me a Laurel Crown," written in 1815, in which he writes: "not an atom less/ Than the proud laurel shall content my bier."

In the first part of the poem, all is fair and happy, sweetness and light. The imagery is sensuous and the poet speaks of "Fair visions," "elysium," and concludes this part with the hope of "Wings to find out an immortality." His extreme dedication to poetry is described in a figure of death. In the midst of this poetry, the poet wishes to "die a death/ Of luxury" (l. 58) so that his soul may follow Apollo. Keats acknowledges the brevity, as well as the beauty, of life in his famous passage on Life:

> Stop and consider! life is but a day;
> A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way
> From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep
> While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep
> Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan?
> Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;
> The reading of an ever-changing tale;
> The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;
> A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;
> A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,
> Riding the springy branches of an elm.
>
> (ll. 85-95).

The tone in this passage is optimistic, because even if life is short, nevertheless, it is still beautiful.

However, this sense of optimism is cut short in the next lines with the poet's plea for time: "O for ten years, that I may overwhelm/ Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed/ That my own soul has to itself decreed" (ll. 96-98). Keats is already aware of the fact that he might not have enough time to accomplish all that he desires, that his life might be cut short by death. In fact, he was not granted the ten years for which he asked; he was not even given five. The discouragement that he feels about not reaching his goals in poetry is felt at this early stage in his development, and, of course, throughout his career. It was expressed in letters written in the following year during the writing of Endymion. In a letter to Leigh Hunt on May 10, 1817, Keats wrote: "I see that nothing but continual uphill Journeying? Now is there any thing more unpleasant ... than to be so journeying and miss the Goal at last." In another letter to Bailey on October 8, 1817, he wrote: "As to what you say about my being a Poet, I can return no answer but by saying that the high Idea I have of poetical fame makes me think I see it towering to high above me."

In this same passage from Sleep and Poetry, Keats begins to realize that life is composed of more than the simple

joys of nature, the realm "Of Flora, and old Pan." He recognizes the fact that he must "bid these joys farewell," and "pass them for a nobler life,/ Where [he] may find the agonies, the strife/ Of human hearts" (ll. 122-125). Thus the poet becomes aware of the necessity of pain and suffering in life. It is the growing realization of this that gradually develops into Keats' mature acceptance of death. At this point, however, he is not ready for that; but at least he is aware of it. When the visions and the dreams disappear, "A sense of real things comes doubly strong,/ And, like a muddy stream, would bear along/ My soul to nothingness" (ll. 157-159). Keats' ideas of poetry are vast and great and he pleads: "O may these joys be ripe before I die" (l. 269). In this poem, a conflict between time and death is presented. Keats wants enough time to write in order that through his poetry he might be immortal after death. So his plea here is for life and time, not death.

"Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition," composed December 23, 1816, is included because of its adverse allusions to death. The poem indicates some of Keats' attitudes toward conventional religion, which he never really accepted. The imagery of the poem presents death as undesirable: "A chill as from a tomb." Keats' disgust and distaste is suggested by such phrases

as "the sermon's horrid sound," and "the mind of man is closely bound/ In some black spell." The only hope is found in the fact that "they are dying like an outburnt lamp;/ That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go/ Into oblivion;--that fresh flowers will grow,/ And many glories of immortal stamp." The poem suggests a bitterness that is not typical of Keats, but which here once again portrays his preoccupation with death.

In Keats' first attempt at a long poem, Endymion, the greatest emphasis is on life in general and love in particular, as opposed to death. His famous passage in the first book on the nature and meaning of happiness indirectly illuminates this opposition by its reference to essence: "Wherein lies happiness? In that which becks/ Our ready minds to fellowship divine,/ A fellowship with essence" (ll. 777-779). Earlier Keats had stated that we must feel the essences of objects, that "They always must be with us, or we die" (l. 33). Essence here suggests life, vitality, as opposed to death.

In Endymion's dream of Cynthia, death and love are associated in a negative way since death is undesirable because it means an end to love. Endymion says: "Madly did I kiss/ The wooing arms which held me, and did give/ My eyes at once to death: but 'twas to live" (ll. 653-655). The last word could just as easily read

"love" in the light of the lines which follow which describe the physical beauty of Endymion's love. Endymion expects death and instead receives love and life. Thus, the two are opposed. It is only later that the two become positively linked. At this point, the "chief intensity" is love and friendship (ll. 800-801); later, death is to become an even greater intensity. Love is the most important thing in life. It is at the top of the crown, the bulk of which is composed of friendship. The nightingale, which in the famous ode is associated with death and immortality, is here associated with love: "She sings but to her love" (l. 830). Here, love is the antidote, the escape from death: "such a breathless honey-feel of bliss/ Alone preserved me from the drear abyss/ Of death" (ll. 903-905). And the vision of his love "tortured [him] with renewed life" (l. 919). At the end of the first book, Endymion's final comment on death suggests only a reluctant acceptance of its necessity. He says: "I'll smile no more, Peona; nor will wed/ Sorrow the way to death; but patiently/ Bear up against it" (ll. 972-974). The emphasis in the first book, however, has generally been on death as something undesirable, and on love as the most desirable thing on this earth.

The emphasis in the second book is much the same. Love and life, in opposition to death, are the

important issues. Death is here associated with quiet, but not the quiet which Keats longed for. Rather it is a quiet which is opposed to life.

> But this is human life: the war, the deeds
> The disappointment, the anxiety,
> Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
> All human; bearing in themselves this good,
> That they are still the air, the subtle food,
> To make us feel existence, and to show
> How quiet death is. (ll. 153-159).

A time will come when Keats will prefer the quiet that death brings to the "disappointment, the anxiety ... and the struggles" which constitute life. In Keats' use of the Alpheus and Arethusa myth in the second book, love is again opposed to death. Alpheus says: "Those fitful sighs/ 'Tis almost death to hear" (ll. 981-982) and he expresses the hope that Arethusa does not wish him to die, with these words: "unless/ Thou couldst rejoice to see my hopeless stream ... pour to death along some hungry sands" (ll. 1001-1004).

The third book of Endymion is, for the most part, a continuation of the themes stated and expressed in the first two books. There is, perhaps, increased emphasis on the necessity for suffering, and a slightly more positive attitude toward death. But the fear of death is nevertheless present as Endymion looks at Glaucus in amazement and cries: "What lonely death am I to die/

In this cold region!" (l. 258). Death again means an end to love. In recalling his most recent pleasure with Cynthia, Endymion now realizes that "[he] must stoop/ [his] head, and kiss death's foot" (ll. 274-275). He continues: "Love! love, farewell/ Is there no hope from thee?" (ll. 275-276). Endymion regrets now that he allowed his desires to cause him to be desperate: "Long in misery/ I wasted, ere in one extremest fit/ I plung'd for life or death" (ll. 378-380).

Keats' negative attitude toward death is most actively and emphatically expressed in his sonnet, "When I Have Fears," written in February 1818. In this poem, Keats expresses his fear that death may claim him before he has had an opportunity to write all that he desires: "When I have fears that I may cease to be/ Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain." Death is here highly undesirable, something to be feared because it means an end to life. The images in the fourth line anticipate Keats' To Autumn: "Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain." Death is here related to love and the certain knowledge of the transiency of love: "Fair creature of an hour!" The poet wishes to "Have relish in the faery power/ Of unreflecting love!," a love unrelated to thought and reason, and he bemoans the fact that he would not have this. Love and fame, two things

which he wishes to possess, both of which can be destroyed by death, are dispelled by the thought of death. Perhaps Keats suggests that through the thought of death, love and fame become unimportant ("to nothingness do sink"). His losses would be great because his dreams are great. He dreams of "high-piled books" which would result from his "teeming brain." He beholds "Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance" in his imagination; and the fear "that he may never live to trace/ Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance" proves to be too much. When the poet is fully cognizant of the effect of death, he knows that he stands alone "on the shore/ Of the wide world," isolated somewhere between the realm of dream and desire and the world of reality.[33]

Some of Keats' poems present a conflict between the poet's intense desire for life and a longing for the peace which only death could bring. Such a poem is his sonnet, "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again." This conflict is particularly presented in the lines: "once again, the fierce dispute/ Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay/ Must I burn through." The "impassion'd clay" represents life and love and "damnation" suggests a kind of death - death of the creative fire of poetry or simply, the end of life, perhaps. The burning symbolizes several things - heat, passion, desire, and trial.

Only a few days before the writing of this poem, which was January 22, 1818, Keats had written in a letter to his brothers: "I am quite perplexed in a world of doubts & fancies--there is nothing stable in the world." A conflict between the world of sensation and the world of thought, or the conflict between his love of romance and beauty and his desire for knowledge and experience, is also expounded in this sonnet. The "old oak Forest" symbolizes life and experience. The poet pleads the fact that he recognizes the importance of reality over dreams: "Let me not wander in a barren dream." The poet asks for "new Phoenix wings to fly at [his] desire" (the Phoenix here obviously implying rebirth) when he is "consumed in the fire" of life and poetry. In other words, he desires a depth of experience through the creative fire of poetry. The point is that the poet here desires life and knowledge, not death.

Still another poem which expresses this conflict is Keats' verse epistle to John Reynolds, written on March 25, 1818. Life is here associated with knowledge. Keats suggests that "High reason" is the prize to be sought after, a prize which he feels sure he will never win: "Oh never will the prize,/ High reason, and the love of good and ill/ Be my award" (ll. 74-76). But he comes to question the merits of this idea by saying that "It

is a flaw/ In happiness to see beyond our bourn--/ It forces us in Summer skies to mourn;/ It spoils the singing of the Nightingale" (ll. 82-85). We recall the nightingale in Endymion, which sang of love, and we anticipate the nightingale of the famous ode, which provides escape from reality. The implication here is that the "singing of the Nightingale" should be pure, free from the pain and suffering that necessarily results from "Imagination brought/ Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined" (ll. 78-79). The truth about the inevitable tragedy which accompanies too much knowledge is borne out by the poet's having seen "too far into the sea" (l. 94) where he "saw too distinct into the core/ Of an eternal fierce destruction,/ And so from Happiness [he] far was gone" (ll. 96-98). In Endymion also, Keats had expressed the idea that to aspire beyond one's abilities means death and failure: "I have clung/ To nothing, lov'd a nothing, nothing seen/ Or felt but a great dream! ... There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent/ His appetite beyond his natural sphere,/ But starv'd and died" (IV, ll. 636-648).

On July 18, 1818, Keats wrote a poem in the Highlands after having visited Burns's country. In it, the attitude toward death is merely suggested, but the suggestion is one of fear and undesirability. He recalls the fear of searching too far that he had outlined in

his epistle to Reynolds in March. Death is here related to the imagination in that Keats implies that man cannot traverse beyond the mortal world nor should he search too far into the unknown, even though the world is "sweet and bitter." He says: "beyond it unaware!" and states that if man stayed too long in the realm of imagination and fancy, he would "forget his mortal way." Keats imagines as "horrible! to lose the sight of well remember'd face" (l. 33). Death is to be shunned and feared and life is to be rejoiced in: "for at the cable's length/ Man feels the gentle anchor pull and gladdens in its strength" (ll. 39-40). It is a cable that chains him to mortality, which also serves as an escape from thoughts of death and the unknown.

Isabella, which Keats composed between February and April 1818, has as two of its main themes, death and love. The two are associated, but in a negative, undesirable way. Death is here the enemy of love. Death brings sorrow and an end to love, and proof of the fact that a soul thus freed "aches in loneliness" (XXVIII). The "breath of Winter" (XXXII) describes Isabel's decline because of the loss of her love. Death makes love more intense. According to Lorenzo's ghost, a vision to Isabel: "Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel/ A greater love through all my essence steal" (XL). The picture

of death is anything but lovely. In stanza XLV, the imagery is of "clayey soil and gravel hard," and one pities "each form that hungry Death hath marr'd." The interrelationship between death and love is evident in Isabel's love for Lorenzo. His "gentleness did well accord/ With death, as life ... Love never dies, but lives, immortal" (L). This stanza also emphasizes the theme of immortality through love. The attitude toward death expressed in this poem reflects Keats' fears that he will not have enough time to do all that he wishes to do. The allusions to death near the end of the poem serve as ironic comment on his own death. The poet pleads for ease in death for Isabel: "Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour" (LVII). He knows that she "Will die a death too lone and incomplete" (LXI), a statement that provides an almost absolute tragic comment on the death of Keats himself.

The Eve of St. Agnes, begun in January 1819 and worked on and revised throughout the year, is a poem of contrasts, the most important of which is that between death, exemplified by the old Beadsman and Angela, and love, portrayed through Porphyro and Madeline. The poem is unified by the imagery of death and cold, as opposed to the life and warmth of the lovers. In the very first stanza, the chilly atmosphere is artistically set, and

the references to death abound in this as well as other stanzas throughout the poem -- "without a death" (I), the "sculptur'd dead" (II), "already had his deathbell rung" (III), "bier" (XII), "silent as a tomb" (XIII). Angela calls herself a "churchyard thing,/ Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll" (XVIII) and she admonishes Porphyro: "Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,/ Or may I never leave my grave among the dead" (XX). The final stanza rounds out the imagery of cold and death: "Angela the old/ Died palsy-twitch'd ... The Beadsman ... For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold" (XLIII).

In the middle of all these references to death lies the story of the love of Porphyro and Madeline. The warmth, the richness, and the sensuousness of their love is in sharp contrast to the images of cold and death which surround them. Within the love story is still another contrast - that between dream and reality, and the allusions supporting this theme are numerous. Madeline "dreams awake" (XXVI) while she is "Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain" through sleep (XXVII). When Madeline awakens, she beholds "the vision of her sleep" which produces in her a "painful change" (XXXIV) because she prefers her dream which was better than the reality. She begs for the dream to return, for Porphyro to give her "Those looks immortal," and she pleads with him not

to leave her "in this eternal woe,/ For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go" (XXXV). The dream then becomes reality: "Into her dream he melted" (XXXVI) and with the consummation of the love, the positions are reversed, and the reality is superior to the dream. One critic has suggested that the consummation of love confers immortality on the lovers, thereby redeeming them from a cold, death-like state. And the death of the old people is contrasted to the mortality of the lovers who, in a sense, die into life. [34]

The poem provides a definite statement for sensuous life and passion and love, but at the same time it raises a question about these things because of the difference between dream and reality. At the end of the poem, the lovers are likened to phantoms, and there is an unreal quality surrounding the entire poem which suggests that perhaps the lovers, instead of finding love at the end, found death. As one critic states: "the flight of the lovers is pregnant with a sense of death." [35] The contrast between dream and reality is so dominant throughout the poem that Keats leaves a question in the mind of the reader. All we know at the end of the poem is that "they are gone: ay, ages long ago/ These lovers fled away into the storm" (XVII). This statement, elusive and vague in itself, is immediately followed by

a reference to nightmares of woe and death, and the cold stark reality of the deaths of the two old people with whom the poem began. Whatever Keats intended, we can be sure that in this poem death is undesirable, in opposition to love.

Keats' preoccupation with thoughts of death led him to thoughts of love and grief, as evidenced by a little poem concerning the death of a dove, which he included in his epistle to his brother, George, on January 3, 1819. The poem is sad, with overtones of longing and loneliness, obviously suggesting the state of Keats' own mind and heart throughout the coming year.

I had a dove and the sweet dove died,
  And I have thought it died of grieving:
O what could it mourn for? it was tied
  With a silken thread of my own hands weaving
Sweet little red-feet why did you die?
Why would you leave me--sweet dove why?
You live'd alone on the forest tree
Why pretty thing could you not live with me?
I kiss'd you oft, and I gave you white peas--
Why not live sweetly as in the green trees--

Keats' "Bright Star" sonnet, originally composed in early 1819, also associates death with love. The poem basically has two moods, shown in the contrast between the lonely, chaste steadfastness of the star and the sensuous steadfastness which the poet desires with his love. Within this choice lies another choice - that offered between immortality with love on the one hand

and death on the other: "And so live ever-- or else swoon to death." The poet wishes to be "Awake for ever in a sweet unrest." In other words, he chooses love as opposed to death. Or, as Aileen Ward phrases it: "No longer the mingling of love and death in a half-drugged confusion of their separate natures, but all too clear a sense of their tragic antithesis--this was the final meaning he wrung from the contrast between the eternal calm watchfulness of the star and his own eternal restlessness, and in effect his final message to Fanny." [36]

In his letters, Keats expounds on happiness as related to death by saying that "Man is originally 'a poor forked creature'," (April 21, 1819 to the George Keatses) and that as such, he is subject to mortal ills. However, if this were not the case, if man were totally happy, he could not then bear death which would, of course, be the inevitable end: "the whole troubles of life which are now frittered away in a series of years, would then be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise." Keats finds that he must "buffet" the world ... "take [his] stand upon some vantage ground and begin to fight" (May 31, 1819 to Sarah Jeffrey).

In Lamia, composed from July to September 1819,

Keats gives voice to the themes of reality versus dream, immortality, and rebirth. He combines the themes of immortality and reality versus dream in the lines: "It was no dream; or say a dream it was,/ Real are the dreams of Gods and smoothly pass/ Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (ll. 126-128). Love is here opposed to death in that the loss of love means death: "Even as thou vanishest so I shall die" (l. 260), says Lycius to Lamia. At the end of the poem, Lycius dies as Lamia is destroyed, thus again suggesting that the loss of love brings death. Another interpretation of this is that philosophy and reason kill passion: "That but a moment's thought is passion's passing bell" (II, l. 39), again emphasizing the constant conflict between sensation and thought which confronted Keats. The poet provides a comment on his own life by suggesting that "finer spirits cannot breathe below/ In human climes, and live" (I, l. 280). They need "purer air."

Keats wrote several poems to Fanny Brawne which once again exhibit his rejection of death. His extreme jealousy bids him desire death or love in his "Ode to Fanny," written January 1819. He is not willing to share one bit of his love with any other: "Let none else touch the just new-budded flower;/ If not--may my eyes close,/ Love! on their last repose." "This living hand," com-

posed in the autumn of 1819, also displays the jealousy which Keats felt because of the intensity of his love for Fanny. Keats thinks of death as "cold/ And in the icy silence of the tomb," certainly not a state to be desired. He suggests that even in death he would haunt her, the living. In "I cry your mercy," written in November 1819, Keats also desires total love or death, as he had previously suggested in his "Ode to Fanny." He admonishes his love to "Withhold no atom's atom or I die." [37] Love has made him "Forget, in the mist of idle misery,/ Life's purposes,--the palate of my mind/ Losing its gust, and my ambition blind!"

In The Fall of Hyperion, death as undesirable plays its most important role in relation to the concepts of rebirth and knowledge. To begin with, the poet upon awakening from his sleep, turns to the west, the region often symbolical of death, where he sees an altar. Moneta, the guide, condemns the poet to death if he cannot ascend the steps to the altar. Just before death the poet's "iced foot touch'd/ The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd/ To pour in at the toes" (ll. 132-134). The poet asks why he should be saved from death, to which the guide answers: "Thou hast felt/ What 'tis to die and live again before/ Thy fated hour" (ll. 141-143). The importance of acquiring knowledge and understanding

suffering in order to obtain immortality is felt in these lines. We recall the same idea from Endymion. Keats' hope for immortality, a life after death, lies on a path through the bowels of the earth: "He ne'er is crown'd/ With immortality, who fears to follow/ Where airy voices lead: so through the hollow,/ The silent mysteries of earth, descend!" (ll. 211-214). It is becoming more evident in Keats' poetry that he recognizes the necessity for suffering and for knowledge as the only means whereby the poet will not only understand life on this earth, but achieve life immortal. In the third book of Endymion, Keats pursues this idea still further. If Glaucus "utterly/ Scans all the depths of magic, and expounds/ The meanings of all motions, shapes, and sounds;/ If he explores all forms and substances/ Straight homeward to their symbol-essences;/ He shall not die" (ll. 696-701). Death here is to be avoided, and the means is through knowledge. The same is true of The Fall of Hyperion in which death, if accepted at all, is accepted only because of love. Only "those to whom the miseries of the world/ Are misery, and will not let them rest ... Who love their fellows even to the death;/ Who feel the giant agony of the world" (ll. 148-157) can climb the steps of the altar to knowledge. Saturn promises: "There is no death in all the universe/ No smell of Death--there shall be

death " (ll. 423-425). Thus death is here undesirable, a symbol of failure and doom.

Keats' correspondence of the last year of his life was largely despairing. As his sickness increased and his death became more imminent, his thoughts of Fanny Brawne became even more intense. At the first sign of the danger of the approaching consumption, when he coughed blood, his thoughts were only of his love. In a letter of February 10, 1820, he writes: "I assure you I felt it possible I might not survive and at that moment thought of nothing but you." His hope is gone, and he writes again a few days later: "I wish I had even a little hope. I cannot say forget me--but I would mention that there are impossibilities in the world." His thoughts of death are here morbid, and he cannot bear to think of being separated from the one he loves most dearly. He writes again: "I should as soon think of choosing to die as to part from you." One of the most tragic statements that Keats utters in defense of life and against death comes in a letter which he penned to James Rice in this same month of February. Here the thought of death has the effect of reminding Keats of the beauties, rather than the misery, of life. He writes: "How astonishingly does the chance of leaving the world impress a sense of its natural beauties on us ... I think of green fields.

I muse with the greatest affection on every flower I have known from my infancy--their shapes and coulours are as new to me as if I had just created them with a superhuman fancy--It is because they are connected with the most thoughtless and happiest moments of our Lives." He concludes by saying: "The simple flowers of our spring are what I want to see again." His letters near the end are full of tragic poignant reminders of the effect of death and apparent failure on a sensitive soul. He wrote to Fanny about his feelings of failure: "If I should die ... I have left no immortal work behind me--nothing to make my friends proud of my memory--but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd." The tragedy and the irony of these lines is almost unbearable. Death is repulsive to Keats in the light of his love. He writes again to Fanny: "how horrid was the chance of slipping into the ground instead of into your arms--the difference is amazing Love--Death must come at last; Man must die ... but before that is my fate I feign would try what more pleasures than you have given so sweet a creature as you can give" (March 1820). He pleads once more: "Let me have another opportunity of years before me and I will not die without being remember'd."

The letters that Keats wrote to his friend, Charles Brown, after he had left England for Italy are of a most despairing and tragic nature. On September 30, Keats wrote: "The very thing which I want to live most for will be a great occasion of my death," thus indicating his recognition of the paradox of life and death. There is also a paradox or conflict expressed in his attitude toward death, as he continues: "I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains, and then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing. Land and Sea, weakness and decline are great seperators, but death is the great divorcer for ever. When the pang of this thought has passed through my mind, I may say the bitterness of death is passed." His misery and unhappiness are almost beyond belief, as he pours out his feelings to Brown: "The thought of leaving Miss Brawne is beyond every thing horrible--the sense of darkness coming over me--I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing." He questions his belief in immortality: "Is there another Life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream? There must be we cannot be created for this sort of suffering." Later, Keats writes: "I can bear to die--I cannot bear to leave her" (November 1, 1820). He writes in this same letter of the "load of WRETCHEDNESS which presses upon [him]"

and he moans: "O, that something fortunate had ever happened to me or my brothers!--then I might hope,--but despair is forced upon me as a habit." He goes on in this same vein: "It surprised me that the human heart is capable of containing and bearing so much misery. Was I born for this end?" By the end of November, he already had "an habitual feeling of [his] real life having past, and [of his] leading a posthumous existence" (November 30, 1820).

CONCLUSION

The life and death of John Keats remains a paradox, elusive and mysterious, a tragedy that is not a tragedy. His was a life and thought of contrasts - the intense desire for life set against the equally intense desire for peace which he finally found in death, the acceptance of death as the only means to understanding life, and the ultimate awareness of the inevitable linking of pleasure and pain, the Romantic concept of the "indissoluble union of the beautiful and the sad." [38] For Keats was, after all, a Romantic poet. He possessed the Romantic "love of death and darkness," [39] and he understood well the Romantic luxury of the "joy of grief." [40] Even the relationship between love and death, which seems so peculiarly Keats' own, is basically a Romantic attitude. Keats, as a Romantic, knew that "to die at the greatest intensity of love is to achieve intensity without diminution." [41] Intensity of life was so important to Keats that his life might be viewed as a "series of increasing sensuous intensities, culminating in the final intensity, death." [42] One of his biographers said of him: "he might have lived longer if he had lived less." [43] The tragedy is that he did not live longer, and that he died believing he had not begun to penetrate the mystery of life.

He made many references in his letters to his failures, and in his final letter to Charles Brown, he wrote: "I always made an awkward bow" (November 30, 1820), an ironic comment on his exit from the world. And yet the paradox of his death is that if he had not lived intensely and thought intensely, he would most assuredly not have been able to write as intensely as he did. The effect of his constant preoccupation with thoughts of death, of suffering and misery in life, of frustration and disappointment in love, produced some of the most intense poetry in the English language, poured from the heart and mind of a sensitive, fevered spirit. Keats, like Apollo, had to die into life, thus admitting the necessity of "self annihilation as the means of self achievement." [44] Although we know that he died of consumption, it is quite likely that this intensity of feeling which Keats possessed hastened his death.

Although Keats never fully resolved his conflicting attitudes toward death, he, nevertheless, finally came to accept death as a desirable end. He came to know that "death is the greatest fact of life. To accept death is to accept life; it is to accept the whole of one's mortal destiny, to see it as necessary and inevitable and beautiful." [45] In his acceptance of death, Keats found the peace which he sought all his life.

Since he could never find this calm in life or through knowledge, he sought it finally in the stillness of death. As one critic aptly puts it: "Keats' central instinct was for high poetic repose: for the quietude that comes, not from avoiding life, but from surmounting it." [46] The goal was, tragically, beyond him - thus, his acceptance of death. Keats also accepted death as desirable because of its increasingly important association for him with Love and Beauty. One of his important desires was for immortality as a poet and death became, in both a literal and symbolical sense, the gate whereby the poet could "die into life," thereby becoming immortal.

Keats was by no means a morbid poet. His preoccupation with death was more than justified because of the difficulties of his life. But, in spite of its justification, his desire for death was often overshadowed by his intense desire for life. Keats participated in life fully, totally, richly, sensuously, and he was much more involved in the realities of life than at least one of his Romantic compatriots, Shelley, who was far more concerned with the ideal world, the unrealities of life, than with the realities. Keats knew the difference between dream and reality. He needed and wished ofttimes to escape reality through the world of dreams, but he was intelligent enough to recognize that, tragic as it

might be, total escape was impossible. He tried it in the Ode to a Nightingale without success. At the end of the poem, he asks: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music;--Do I wake or sleep?" The tolling bell brings him back to reality, to his conscious, rather than his unconscious, self.

For Keats, then, the conflict remained. Death was both "the great divorcer for ever" from life which he loved intensely, and at the same time, the ultimate path to the peace and ease which the poet equally loved and desired. His life was a continual search for knowledge, for beauty, for intensity, for truth. His tragedy is that he never knew he had achieved any of these things. But, through his sensitive awareness of life, made poignantly sharper by his thoughts of death, he has conveyed for all time a richness, an intensity, and a depth of vision to all those sensitive souls who love beauty, truth, and life. This is the final meaning, then, not the tragedy, of Keats' life and death.

FOOTNOTES

1 Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry, Vol. I (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), p. 52.

2 The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. H.W. Garrod, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1958). All citations from the poems of Keats are to this edition.

3 Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Keats and the Struggle for Existence Tradition," PMLA, LXIV (1949), 100.

4 E.C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 163.

5 John M. Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (London, 1926), p. 92.

6 Walter Jackson Bate, Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. 40.

7 Dorothy Van Ghent, "Keats's Myth of the Hero," K-SJ, III (Winter 1954), 19.

8 Murry, p. 175.

9 Allen Tate, "A Reading of Keats," On the Limits of Poetry (New York, 1948), p. 175.

10 Ernest De Selincourt, "The Warton Lecture on Keats," The John Keats Memorial Volume (Hampstead, February 23, 1921), p. 13.

11 Newell Ford, "Endymion--A Neo-Platonic Allegory?," ELH, XIV (1947), 69.

12 Douglas Bush, "Keats," Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 95.

13 R.A. Foakes, "The Vision of Love," The Romantic Assertion (New Haven, 1958), pp. 82-85.

14 Finney, I, 157.

15 H.W. Garrod, Keats, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1939), p. 98.

16 Ibid., p. 99.

17 Paul Baumgartner, "Keats: Theme and Image in a Sonnet," K-SJ, VIII (Winter 1959), 12-13.

18 Bate, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 142.

19 Aileen Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet (New York, 1963), p. 260.

20 Idem.

21 Pettet, p. 68.

22 David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 246.

23 Charles Williams, "The Evasion of Identity: (ii) The Nightingale and the Grecian Urn," Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind (Oxford, 1933), p. 63.

24 John Holloway, "The Odes of Keats," Cambridge Journal, V (April, 1952), 421.

25 Alexander W. Crawford, The Genius of Keats: An Interpretation (London, 1932), p. 102. The nightingale is traditionally a symbol of sadness and melancholy. Note here that it is not the nightingale, but the poet, who is sad.

26 Pettet, pp. 78, 79.

27 Murry, p. 29.

28 Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1939), p. 31.

29 James Boulger, "Keats' Symbolism," ELH, XXVIII (1961), 247.

30 Bush, p. 107.

31 Arnold Davenport, "A Note on 'To Autumn'," John Keats: A Reassessment, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool, 1958), p. 96.

32 Ibid., p. 97.

33 M.A. Goldberg, "The 'Fears' of John Keats," MLQ, XVIII (1957), 125-131, takes a different view of the poem. He suggests that the poet is free from a concern with death, and therefore, rises above fears; he even rises above love and fame which sink. What remains is the essence. Death is a negating force, while poetry and love are the positive forces. Personal isolation and thinking lead to pure essence which, in turn, leads to self annihilation, which finally results in death. Therefore, Goldberg concludes that death is life's highest value, "an entrance into permanence and essence."

34 Foakes, p. 92.

35 Herbert G. Wright, "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?," MLR, XL (1945), 91.

36 Ward, p. 379.

37 In Clarence Thorpe's edition of John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters (New York, 1935), the word is "withhold." In Garrod's edition, the word is "without." The former seems to make better sense in the context of the poem.

38 Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, 2nd ed. (London, 1951), p. 31.

39 Pettet, p. 305.

40 Ibid., p. 310.

41 Tate, p. 183.

42 Earl Wasserman, "Keats and Benjamin Bailey," MLN, LXVIII (1953), 365.

43 Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton), Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats (New York, 1848), p. 163.

44 Murry, p. 53.

45 Ibid., p. 126.

46 G.R. Elliott, "The Real Tragedy of Keats," PMLA, XXXVI (1921), 315.

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